

Is Your Community an Information Age Community?

1. Are community leaders aware of the importance of information technology and do they work together to address IT development issues?

Yes No

2. Are high bandwidth services available to all businesses, organizations, and residents?

Yes No

3. Does your community have affordable access to telecommunications services? Affordable access and high-speed access are often two different things. Both should be available in a community.

Yes No

4. Does your community have public access sites and free or affordable training on basic computer and Internet skills?

Yes No

5. Are there opportunities for advanced information technology training through local high schools, colleges and universities, or other institutions?

Yes No

6. Are economic development initiatives tied to the needs of Information Age businesses? These efforts should include the development and support of local entrepreneurs and the development of a skilled workforce.

Yes No

7. Are online community services and information--including government, schools, and libraries--available? In many communities, information technology may be an effective and efficient way to improve access to health care.

Yes No

8. Are there good lines of communication and good working relationships among community institutions and citizens? Information technology can be used to inform and involve citizens, building social capital. Communities in which institutions and citizens work well together are more successful in their development efforts.

Yes No

9. Does your community pay careful attention to quality of life issues? A high quality of life is essential to attract and retain IT workers and businesses.

Yes No

Scoring. Give your community one point for each question answered with a "yes":

- 0-2 Traditional Economy Community
- 3-7 Emerging Information Age Community
- 8-9 Information Age Community

Many of these assessment questions were drawn from "Building eCommunities: Getting Everyone Connected" by Andrew Michael Cohill, available at www.designnine.com/library/docs/ecomunities.pdf.

Traditional Economy Communities

Traditional Economy Communities may initially need to focus their efforts on leadership development and helping community members understand the benefits of the Information Age. Communities—especially smaller communities—may benefit from forming countywide or regional partnerships to address IT issues. For example, hosting a countywide technology fair may be more feasible than having an individual community host the event.

Many Traditional Economy Communities may find it more productive to focus on short-term goals initially. As community leaders and citizens become more knowledgeable about IT issues, a more thorough plan with long-term goals can be developed. Examples of activities that Traditional Economy Communities may want to consider are listed below:

- Host a community IT tour to see firsthand how local businesses, schools, health care providers, and governments are using IT.
- Tour an Information Age Community.
- Encourage emerging community leaders to participate in a leadership development program.
- Host a technology fair.
- Host introductory computer and Internet classes. Encourage community leaders who have little experience to attend.
- Host introductory e-commerce classes. Encourage community leaders—especially economic development and Chamber of Commerce staff—who have little experience to attend.
- Provide public access to computer resources and the Internet or develop a community IT learning center.
- Help businesses develop an initial Web site.
- Explore strategies for encouraging the deployment of advanced services and stimulating competition.
- Build partnerships within the community and region and become familiar with state, federal, and foundation resources.
- Encourage community leaders to attend regional or statewide conferences or workshops on IT development.
- Utilize e-mail discussion lists or Web sites for information on IT development.
- Address quality of life issues.
- Make local information available online.

Emerging Information Age Communities

Emerging Information Age Communities are diverse in their needs and in the maturity of their IT leadership. Emerging Information Age Communities may be new to the strategic planning process, may have begun the strategic planning process but need to reenergize their leadership, or may be well on their way to becoming Information Age Communities. Forming countywide or regional partnerships to address IT issues may help communities leverage their existing resources.

Examples of activities that Emerging Information Age Communities may want to consider are listed below:

- Strengthen partnerships within the community and region.
- Encourage community leaders to attend regional, statewide or national conferences or workshops on IT development.
- Encourage community leaders to utilize e-mail discussion lists or Web sites for information on IT development.
- Host a technology fair.
- Host a community IT tour to see firsthand how local businesses, schools, health care providers, the library, and governments are using IT.
- Tour an Information Age Community.
- Host introductory and advanced computer, Internet, and networking classes.
- Host introductory and advanced e-commerce classes.
- Integrate IT into community and economic development plans and processes.
- Encourage the development of IT support services within the community or region.
- Encourage entrepreneurship development.
- Examine current regulations to see how they impact Information Age businesses.
- Help businesses move from static Web sites to conducting transactions online.
- Encourage the deployment of advanced services and stimulate competition.
- Address youth retention through school to work or other initiatives.
- Increase local services and information available online or through other IT technologies (i.e., distance learning or telehealth).
- Address quality of life issues.

Information Age Communities

Information Age Communities are keenly aware that IT development is a moving target. Although Information Age Communities often are still working on some of the activities and strategies suggested for Emerging Information Age Communities, they are also undertaking more ambitious projects. Information Age Communities often look to other Information Age communities across the United States and internationally for ideas. If involved in a countywide or regional partnership, the Information Age community assumes a leadership role. Community leaders from Information Age Communities also often participate in policy development at the state and federal level.

Blacksburg, Virginia pioneered the concept of an Information Age community. Back in the late 1980s, Virginia Tech proposed using telecommunications to connect residents by building a community network. Today, Blacksburg has the highest per capita use of the Internet in the world. Over 60 percent of Blacksburg's residents have high-speed broadband access in their businesses and apartments. Over 24 technology companies

have been started in Blacksburg in the last five years and the Virginia Tech Corporate Research Center is one of the fastest growing business parks in the nation.¹

In Nebraska, Aurora is a good example of an Information Age community and the synergistic outcomes of Information Age development. Through a strategic planning process, Hamilton County developed a strategic information technology plan in 1994. The plan was updated in 1999. By bringing representatives of the key institutions in the county together and systematically addressing the IT needs of the county, Aurora and Hamilton County have begun to realize the benefits of the Information Age. Aurora's initial technology fair in 1994 increased community awareness of the importance of information technology and helped build community support for the deployment of information technology in the schools. A videoconferencing system in the hospital is used primarily for consultations and training for medical center and hospital staff, but is also available for use by local businesses. Hamilton Telecommunications has a telemarketing center and provides TDD services for five states. As demand for advanced services has grown, Hamilton Telecommunications has deployed DSL and ISDN in the community. A software company moved to Aurora, attracted by the availability of office space, advanced telecommunications services, and the quality of life.

On April 1, 2001, the Aurora Technology Center opened its doors to technology-related start-ups and businesses needing to make strategic changes. With the opening of the Aurora Technology Center, Hamilton County realized a major goal of the 1999 strategic IT plan due to the combined efforts of community members and the Hamilton County Information Technology Corporation. The Aurora Technology Center utilized various funding sources, donations and many volunteer hours to convert a former nursing home into a facility with 22 offices, conference room, sixteen-station Technology Training Center, with high-speed Internet access (DSL) and cable available throughout and with office equipment and furnishings not normally available to start-up businesses. More importantly to the clients and the business community at-large, the Aurora Technology Center provides professional consulting, business and technology training focusing on the use of technology to strengthen and create new opportunities via e-commerce, and networking with other start-up and entrepreneurial organizations. Aurora Technology Center client businesses provide content management, network security, customized training, civil engineering, funding and grant research and proposals, social science research, agricultural lending, Web site development, business and technology consulting, home energy auditing and software development. With seven clients employing 20-23 people, the Aurora Technology Center has reached an occupancy rate of 75%, filling 15 of the 22 offices².

This assessment tool was developed by Anne Byers, Community IT Manager for the Nebraska Information Technology Commission, with input from members of the Community IT Toolkit Committee.

¹ See "Building eCommunities: Getting Everyone Connected" by Andrew Michael Cohill, available at www.designnine.com/library/docs/ecommunities.pdf.

² Information on the Aurora Technology Center was provided by Christine Angerame, July, 2003.